Lyon in Winter

Sick as a dog, but not sick of the dogs

TIM FOLEY
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I visited Lyon for the New Year. Gorgeous city. Bloody freezing. The area we stayed in

was mainly populated by women who were eighty-plus, so muffled in designer coats that the only way they identified each other was by their chunky spectacles. Oh, and by their dogs. They had lots and lots of dogs, attached on taut colourful leads - big tall slim ones, round blobby yappy ones, all well-groomed and well-dressed… Lyon is such a dog-friendly city, but it's clear these women have bullied it into being even friendlier, since even the local grocery shops with NO DOGS signs have water bowls and treats at the end of every aisle. Oh, to be a Lyoness of Lyon.

But in the twisted streets of the old town across the river(s plural, Lyon is pinched by the Rhône and the Saône)… there are more curious residents. Lining the cobbles are hundreds of small, deflated effigies. They loll here, arms outstretched, heads aslump - until you spot one that's been propped up to leer at passersby. You lean in closer for a better/worse look at their painted faces. The deathmask eyes, the frozen smirks…

…okay yeah they're puppets. But like, an endless array of puppets. Lyon is the home of 'Guignol', who is a character similar to the UK's 'Punch' (*and Germany's 'Kasperle', I was informed by a delighted and delightful tourist from Munich… and having checked him out online… wow he's so much worse*). Guignol is a 'beleaguered but resourceful worker' who takes aim at France's upper-classes, and here in his birth city you can treat yourself to a souvenir replica of him or his mates. Yes, do take home your very own 19th century CHILD'S PLAY.

Yet I did not need to pick up a crumpled marionette. For reader… *I became one.*

(This is a needlessly dramatic way of saying I got a cold.)

The Dreaded Deadline Lurgy

Whenever I hit a big writing deadline, one that's been a light at the end of a tunnel for many months (not *the* light and not *the* tunnel you understand, because I am a freelancer, and I must endlessly juggle. Slash, uh, burrow), my body gives up on me. Do you recognise this phenomenon? It's the tension that's held in it for so long - the hours stuck at the desk, the focus, the fretting, the *don't be sick, don't be sick, don't be sick* that grinding away at the back of your mind… But I can somehow hold back the snuffly, groggy tide. Take that King Cnut.

And I did indeed have a big deadline looming. New Year's Eve, how festive. And unfortunately… *it was going well.*

Why was that bad? There was no last-minute panic, I'd been chipping away word by word and scene by scene for weeks and months now, I'd done a vast amount of research, heck, I was even *enjoying* myself… and clearly I was getting a little too comfortable.

And because I was so comfortable, I think my body thought the danger had past. The defences began to relax. And something slooooowly started unfurling, no, fading inside of me. ~~It was like a great hand was pulling out of me~~ (*oh god Tim stop trying to make the*

puppet stuff work)

So here it was, the post-deadline sickness. Yet this time there was nothing post about it; I hadn't sent the script yet. And I began blinking at my incomprehensible scribbles with sickly eyes and oh god, maybe I hadn't been making good progress after all, maybe this is actually quite rubbish. Especially this bit, Christ, why did I think this scene was ever a good idea? If I were at full strength, I could fix this, and this, and this, but I'm not. I'm sick. And I'm DOOMED.

stumbling into shops and stepping over haute-coutured hounds (oh pardon madam) to find the tissues and the vitamin-y soups

Once I shoveled enough medication inside of me and plonked myself back at my desk… okay, things aren't that bad. And I get back to work. But my God, it is Work. This pleasurable saunter to the finishing line was now an agonizing crawl.

The Struggling Artist

Don't worry, I got the draft in. But since then, I've been thinking/worrying… *did I need that last-minute obstacle*? On some unconscious level? I have writer friends who really, really need deadlines to do anything. That friction of being Up Against It. Perhaps my body was just producing the necessary grit. And mucus, gross, sorry. But it would've been wrong to be TOO happy with my work, right? I remember one script editor telling me you had to be wary of the scripts you were pleased with…

…but hmmmm, I don't know. When I start thinking along these lines, I get whiffs of 'the struggling artist' myth - that idea we need to be huddled and shivering in a turret to produce anything of worth. I still maintain that one of the best plays I've written to date (*ELECTRIC ROSARY, whose glorious robot nun artwork adorns this substack, pick up your copy here*) was only possible because of my funded residency at the beautiful Pentabus Theatre. They gave me time and space and money to imagine, research, plot, draft, *re*draft… and though I was writing it *at* Pentabus, I wasn't writing it *for* Pentabus, so there was a curious liberation there too - I didn't have to think commercially, or bear in mind 'what was possible' for the company.*

But was that a freak occurrence? It's not as though I'm able to regularly repeat that experiment. And I worry I'm ignoring the fact the script needed the pressure-cooker of

a rehearsal period back in 2022 to boil it down and become its best version. And that rehearsal period was hard. Hang on, didn't I get sick then too?

Urgh. 'The struggling artist'. I don't *want* to struggle. I wanna be lazy. I wanna write in the morning and then stroll around somewhere pretty. Yes, like Lyon. Give me my designer coat. (I already have the dog. And yes he's in all three pictures.)

Yet I don't ask for a deadline extension. They would've given me one, they're not monsters. My ego dictates I keep writing. Yes, I must Suffer. For my Art.

(Looking back, it may not have been my artistic sensibilities punishing me. It may just be all the cheese muffling my immune system.)

Write Well, Read Well, Live Well

I've never experienced a Martin Amis before, but I found myself turning to his INSIDE STORY for some project research. It's a life. Not necessarily *his* life, not quite an autobiography, there are fake bits, short stories, writing tips and factual detours, it's a lil self-indulgent… but I found it quite beguiling to hear these stories (true or otherwise) about the 20th century literary scene. At its heart is the exploration of Amis' differing relationships with three different writers: Saul Bellow (the novelist), Philip Larkin (the poet) and Christopher Hitchens (the essayist). The stuff concerning the latter's death was especially touching.

And it's clear throughout the book that Amis is a *reader*. Describing himself at eighteen, he claims he used to say to himself:

> *I don't want to be a writer (not yet). I want to be a reader. I just want to be part of it…*
>
> Even if I never write, complete, publish anything at all, ever… A padded seat and a standard lamp (and of course an open book). That would be enough. Then I'd be a part of it.

That feels like his overriding message through the book - one should write well, read well, and live well. And not necessarily in that order.

So, since I've just handed in some chonky writing… yes, I'm going to keep scrawling, lightly, because I can't help myself, but I want to indulge myself in a lot more reading too. Is this a New Year's Resolution? I don't know, I don't tend to make those, but hey what the heck. Bonne année.

I've been trawling French bookshops for English-language books. And that's not as foolish as you might think. They can often be found in a hidden section marked "V.O." (Version Originale) and it's typically an eclectic dozen. It's such a lottery, but I've so far enjoyed the strange limitation that places upon my reading list… especially since I'm reading them for fun, there are ~~no strings attached~~

The shots ring out.

Guignol lowers his gun, weeping.

"I warned you about the puppet stuff Tim... I warned you..."

*Pentabus Theatre are on Substack btw - give them a follow here!

6 Likes

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Comments Restacks

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Marcel van Driel Jan 9

Liked by Tim Foley

I used to need deadlines. Now they're more a way to plan how many words I've have to write a day (I always go for 1.000 words a day, but it's different with prose I guess). But missing deadlines is horrible! Get better soon.

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